

The moral muteness of managers: An Anglo-American phenomenon?

“The moral muteness of managers: An Anglo-American phenomenon? German and British managers and their moral reasoning about environmental sustainability in business”

Abstract:

Several studies in the Anglo-American context have indicated that managers present themselves as morally neutral employees who act only in the best interest of the company by employing objective skills. The reluctance of managers to use moral arguments in business is further accentuated in the now common argument presented as a neutral fact that the company must always prioritise shareholder value. These and other commercial aims are seen as an objective reality in business, while questions about sustainability, environmental problems or fair trade are seen as emotional or moral ones;; a phenomenon described as 'moral muteness'. This research explores whether this 'moral muteness' is an Anglo-American phenomenon and/or whether managers in other countries - in this case Germany – might express themselves in a different way. The focus is on moral arguments around environmental sustainability and the implications of this study for cross-cultural management. This paper is based on a qualitative, comparative cross-cultural study of British and German managers in the Food Retail and Energy Sectors. In line with the studies mentioned above, British managers placed a strong emphasis on their moral neutrality. In contrast, German managers tended to use moral arguments when discussing corporate greening, often giving such arguments more weight than financial arguments. Overall, the study suggests that the 'moral muteness' of managers is a British phenomenon and quite distinct from the German approach. The paper ends in a short exploration of how this understanding can help managers better manage people, organizations and change across cultures.

Key words: Moral muteness, Moral reasoning, Business Ethics, Environmental Sustainability, Cross-national, cross-cultural

Introduction

In his philosophical analysis of moral reasoning, MacIntyre (1981:71) makes the observation that “managers themselves and most writers about management conceive themselves as morally neutral

characters whose skills enable them to devise the most efficient means of achieving whatever end is proposed.” He then argues that not only the ends, but also the means employed such as effectiveness, are distinctively moral concepts. His arguments are taken up by Roberts (1984) who suggests that, if they do so at all, managers seek to justify themselves morally only with regard to the ends they aim to achieve. “Thus typically it is the pursuit of the survival and growth of the ‘organization as a whole’ that for most managers is the *assumed* moral basis of their action and that provides them with a blanket justification for a whole variety of practises” (Roberts, 1984: 288). Anything that needs to be done to achieve this end is regarded as morally neutral, which includes the dominant concept of effectiveness, and other means such as satisfying shareholder demands, engineering and fulfilling customer needs and ‘managing human resources’. But as Watson (2002:448) points out “No managerial act can be morally neutral because every such act occurs in the context of relationships in which there is, at the very least, a potential for exploitation.” The question whether a company sells rugs made by children or not, is a moral one whatever the outcome. Every other managerial task in this context such as the salary the children get, how they are controlled, how many breaks they get, what possibilities they have to learn new skills, are moral questions where managers have a choice between different values. However, not only are the means morally questionable, so too are the ends. In Watson’s ethnographic study (1998:265) one of the managers emphasized this when he posed the question “You could have a death camp operating with a clear morality where all the guards trusted each other, were open and honest with each other, treated each other fairly and, well, would that be moral?”.

The reluctance of managers to use moral arguments in business was also observed by Bird and Waters (1989), who labelled this phenomenon the ‘moral muteness of managers’: “Many managers exhibit a reluctance to describe their actions in moral terms even when they are acting for moral reasons. They talk as if their actions were guided exclusively by organizational interests, practicality and economic good sense, even when in practice they honour morally defined standards codified in law, professional conventions, and social mores” (1989: 73).

However, these observations were all made in an American or British context. This article will investigate whether ‘moral muteness’ is an international phenomenon among managers or specific to the Anglo-American context. More specifically, the research will compare and contrast how managers in the UK and Germany talk about moral arguments in relation to environmental sustainability in a business discourse. The first part of this article reviews the literature on ‘moral muteness’, followed by a short summary of national studies in both countries under investigation about moral arguments in relation to environmental problems. After a short overview of the comparative survey undertaken as part of this study, the accounts of the managers in both countries will be analyzed and common patterns identified. The conclusion will focus on the implications these insights have on management in cross-cultural settings.

Moral muteness and environmental sustainability

Crane (2000) investigates this moral muteness further with regard to ‘corporate greening’. Not only does he observe the reluctance of managers to use moral language, he even advances the proposition that “there is a tendency in corporations for greening to be accompanied by a process of *amoralization*” (p 673), which he later defines as “the denial of moral status for the environment, or the avoidance of moral reflection or attachment in relation to greening; essentially, it concerns the phenomenon whereby greening is rendered an amoral subject” (674).

This process of amoralization can take a different course depending on the organizational type. Crane finds the strongest evidence of amoralization in the ‘conventional companies’, one of the types he researched. Here respondents were very reluctant to talk about green issues in moral terms. “Essentially, what this amounted to was the appropriation of ‘rational’ discourses of science, commercial logic, costs, and/or customer satisfaction to communicate environmental issues, and privileging these discourses over what were referred to as the ‘emotive’ discourses utilized by the media or pressure groups” (Crane 2000: 682). In his second group of companies, the ‘Business-NGO Collaboration’, Crane observed the dominance of the techno-rationalist discourse as exhibited by the corporate members, but also some evidence of a more moralized discourse brought in especially by

the NGO members. Interestingly in his third group of companies, which Crane termed 'social mission companies' and which consisted of companies that gave prominence to social over economic goals, senior managers spoke intensively about their own moral values, but were reluctant to introduce this moral language into other levels of their organizations.

If managers talk at all about moral values they often focus on their own self-interest or that of their company. In his study about the moral reasoning of CEOs in their letters to stakeholders (as part of the annual social responsibility report), Weber (2010) demonstrates how most CEOs focus on their company's best interest and only refer to other societal values in how they have an impact on their company. Most of them do not show any concern beyond the business organization and just focus on how the company needs to deal, for example, with environmental concerns to avoid harm *for* the company, not for society at large. Their arguments are often presented as business arguments, for example, why this is beneficial for the company. This is often linked to 'making the business case' as in Watson's (2003) study about the moral reasoning of one manager called Glenn Ferness. She translates her values into business arguments. "Put simply, it means showing that what the manager takes to be 'right', according to his or her personal values, is appropriate for the successful commercial performance of the organization" (Watson 2003: 183). Here, Watson notes a contradiction between the personal values and the assumed value-neutral purpose of business, the successful commercial performance. One could argue that by translating values into 'business thinking' the same process of amoralization applies as in Crane's (2000) study described above.

In his earlier study about managers and their 'thinking', Watson (1996:337) observed that managers were able to express their own values, but that the "principles which appear to underpin their thinking are ones which combine moral categories with pragmatic conceptions of what 'will work' – what will work in the sense of helping managers carry out the tasks for which they are responsible". Watson contrasts his own research with Jackall's (1988) study of North American executives who just focus on their own career "surrendering their personal moralities" (Watson 1996:333). However, the point that this current paper wants to make is that there are not distinct sides with personal values on one side and then pure, objective business reasoning on the other. Whatever managers do, they will follow

a set of values. This is best captured in the term 'corporate morality' as used by Watson (2003), but in contrast to his definition, in a more all-encompassing sense, including the essence of *all* business practices and principles. Jackall (1988) described this phenomenon, commenting that managers seem to leave their own moral values outside their organisation and just follow what is requested from them by their superiors. In this way they follow 'corporate morality', but as will be shown throughout this study the managers follow this corporate morality, without however appreciating that this *is* morality, so a set of value-based business principles. They will see these principles as value-neutral and therefore not open to a discussion about values.

The main research question in this study is whether this process of amoralization and/or moral muteness is typical of managers in a British context, where Crane's (2000) and Watson's (1996/2003) studies were undertaken, or in an American context as in the case of Bird and Waters (1989) and Jackall (1988)? Or whether this is a phenomenon which can be observed across managers in various cultures?

There is no evidence that previous cross-cultural studies combining 'moral muteness' and environmental sustainability have been undertaken. However the comparison between individual studies undertaken separately about either British or German managers, how they perceive environmental values and how they claim to incorporate these into their business decisions, offers a first insight that 'moral muteness' might be a specific 'Anglo-American phenomenon'.

British managers and their environmental values

Fineman (1996,1997,1998a,1998b) describes in his studies how British managers reconstruct environmental problems - put forward to them by pressure groups or regulators - as technical problems, which are to be solved in a traditional bureaucratic manner. In their negotiations with regulators, managers would aim for cost minimization. Most managers would stress the point that they separate their own morals and feelings from what is in the company's best interest. This would entail the requirement to increase turnover due to commercial pressures and to serve their shareholders and customers. Customer expectations in particular were seen as the driving force,

neglecting any influence marketing techniques have on their wants. Managers would also postulate that businesses should not reduce or change their product range according to somebody's moral views (neither their own nor of specific customers). This position assumes that the existing product range is objective and not influenced by any moral decisions, which is questionable. For example the decision taken in the first instance to stock or not to stock tuna caught under certain circumstances, is a moral one as explained above. Fineman contrasts the moral, emotional world of the eco-transformers with the 'language of rationality' (1998a: 247) dominant in business discourse. He describes the managers as "skilled in techno-rationalization – taking the emotional sting out of the environmental debate...[and suggests that] moral conduct requires more than the application of certain ethical rules. It is 'felt'. The anxiety, guilt or shame that triggers feelings of responsibility for the broader effects of one's actions are learned in situations beyond those of just the organization" (1997: 36). His way of contrasting rationality and emotionality reinforces the view that there is an 'objective, neutral stance' managers can take and that morals are introduced later or as an add-on.

Schaefer and Harvey (2000:175) reported that some managers found it easier to relate to other managers with "a business-focused approach, emphasizing business risks accruing from a 'less than professional approach' to environmental issues" than to a manager with "a deep-ecology discourse, less concerned with reducing business risks than with promoting genuine ecological concern".

Managers and environmental values in Germany

The German studies (Hammerl, 1994; Heine and Mautz, 1993/1995) reported similar findings to the British studies, in that managers described their rational discourse as based on economic and technological facts and not biased by emotions and prejudices. However, their understanding of rationality differed, especially with regard to environmental issues. Rather than stressing an economic point of view, some managers would claim that industry is better prepared than anyone else to solve environmental problems based on scientific knowledge and a holistic approach. Overall, all German managers interviewed integrated environmental issues into their economic-technological reasoning

and were, under certain circumstances, prepared to sacrifice financial (short-term) gains. Environmental protection was seen less as an emotive topic, although the German managers would stress as much as their UK colleagues that their decisions were based on facts rather than emotions. However, the German managers introduced moral considerations into their rational discourse when they claimed for example that their rationality with its holistic approach is morally advanced, while the UK managers argued that economic rationality is free of any moral judgements, which they seemed to put on a level with emotional reasoning.

As these studies were undertaken separately in the two different countries, these differences might have been due to the different designs, as the German studies included more questions related to the moral views of managers in personal encounters. However, it will be shown in this paper that the current differences are even more pronounced when managers in both countries are exposed to the same questions.

Sensemaking and culture

These comparisons imply that German and British managers differ in their understanding of the managerial role with regard to moral issues, or that they at least present themselves differently when questioned about their attitudes to environmental issues. This indicates how much values depend on the culture in which the manager lives. Culture can be best understood with the assumption made by Kluckhohn (1962: 318) that “every society’s patterns for living must provide approved and sanctioned ways for dealing with such universal circumstances as the existence of two sexes; the helplessness of infants; the need for satisfaction of the elementary biological requirements such as food, warmth, and sex; the presence of individuals of different ages and of differing physical and other capacities”.

As a result, it can be added that all societies also need to develop patterns for how to deal with environmental issues. All societies produce waste and need to decide what to do with it, even if they decide just to throw it away, without paying too much attention to it. All societies use finite resources, energy and so on and again need to decide how to handle these resources, even if they decide not to formulate any rules. In all cases, they follow certain values, but maybe not explicitly.

Methodology and Method

The methodology adopted in the present study is interpretivist and builds on the social constructionist approach to environmental issues as developed by Hannigan (1995: 31) in recognising “the extent to which environmental problems and solutions are end-products of a dynamic social process of definition, negotiation and legitimation both in public and private settings”. This approach is applied to the societal group of managers: How do managers choose, assemble and present environmental knowledge and concerns? How do they act upon these in their own words? Special attention is given to the framing of environmental issues as moral problems within the business discourse.

The research strategy employed for this study is a qualitative embedded multiple-case design (Yin 1994), which uses semi-structured interviews as its main research method, enriched through observations and company documentations analysed in advance and fed into the interviews. The studies were carried out in two countries (UK and Germany) within the food retail and energy sectors between 2002 and 2004. These two different sectors were chosen to assess whether differences between the managers might be related to the industrial sector to which they belong and/or the national culture. The companies in the food retail sector were divided into two groups; one with what the researcher termed an ‘ecological corporate identity’ and one which she described as ‘conventional’. Again the idea here was to investigate whether the corporate culture might be more influential than the national culture. The group with an ecological corporate identity consisted of companies that sell exclusively organic food, companies that belong to the health food shop movement in the UK, or equivalent outlets in Germany such as the ‘Reformhaus’, and finally supermarket chains, which are differentiating themselves in their marketing strategy as an ethical or environmental company, such as the Co-op in the UK. A similar approach was planned for companies in the energy sector but proved difficult for the UK as most ‘conventional’ energy providers have now embarked on offering a green tariff and/or created a subsidiary with a focus on renewable energies. There are only a few companies which offer solely ‘green energy’, so it was not feasible to construct two groups. In the UK, most major supermarket chains (with one exception) participated in the study,

but names have not been included, as strict confidentiality was granted; this is also reflected in the abbreviations used to describe the interviewees. The researcher decided against using the job titles, mainly because some are shared only among a small group of employees such as environmental programme manager and some are even unique titles used only within one company making it possible to identify the individual (and the company). The abbreviations used to classify the interviewees were therefore based on the two countries, so 'G' for Germany and 'UK' for United Kingdom, then the two sectors studied (so 'F' for food retail and 'E' for energy) and finally the corporate ecological identity as described above (so 'E' for 'Ecological Identity' and 'C' for 'Conventional').

The researcher employed 'multi-stage cluster sampling' (Bryman and Bell, 2003) to identify the case study individuals for the semi-structured interviews. The sampling was to follow three stages: First companies in the retail sector and in the energy sector in Germany and the UK were identified. In both industries – food retail and energy – companies were then chosen with a different approach to environmental issues as described above. All other factors besides these two were kept as similar as possible in the different companies, such as size. In the third stage it was anticipated to select three individuals from each company, preferably one 'environmental champion', one environmental manager and one marketing manager; this is because 'environmental champions' and environmental managers were named in earlier studies (Fineman, 1997; Schaefer and Harvey, 2000) as drivers for environmental change. However, due to significant access problems, especially from the Head Offices, it was not possible to follow this sampling approach fully, even though confidentiality was promised. The first two clusters (countries and companies in different industries with different environmental orientations) were achieved, but in most companies only one manager was interviewed. The breakdown of the 31 interviewees was as follows: 14 British managers (4 Interviewees from ecological oriented Food Companies/ 4 from conventional Food Companies and 6 Interviewees from the Energy Sector) and 17 German managers (5 Interviewees from ecological

oriented Food Companies/ 5 from conventional Food Companies and 7 Interviewees from the Energy Sector).

The interviews lasted on average between two and three hours and were undertaken on the business premises. The interviews were conducted by the researcher in the mother tongue of the interviewee; the questionnaire was first designed in English and then carefully translated into German using professional translators. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed.

The questionnaire addressed also other research topics, which were analyzed and published separately (Molthan-Hill, 2009). The analysis in this article to explore the moral sensemaking of managers was based on responses to the following questions:

A) Current position

1. How would you describe your own role within the company?
2. To what extent do environmental issues (as you would define them) arise for you in your work? How would you describe your point of view in regards to environmental issues?
3. Do you think you can influence the environmental policy and actions of your company?
4. *(If they show passion or other indications of own involvement, pick up with this question: Are you driven in your daily work by the chance to act upon your own ecological values in shaping the demand?)*

B) Past Influences (selection of questions most relevant here)

1. Is there someone you would view as a role model with regards to environmental issues?
2. What people, writers, friends, ideas or movements have influenced you? *(then quote churches, philosophers etc.!)*
3. If I would use the term “environmentalists” – what would it mean to you?
 - a) So to what extent do you consider yourself an environmentalist?
 - b) If negative, what characterises a typical environmentalist for you?

The questions were posed in the same order; however the researcher would follow up on certain comments made by the interviewee.

The focus of the survey was on managerial orientations towards environmental issues. The managers were not asked directly about their values, but their answers were later analysed on how they would use moral arguments to underline their points of view. The interviewees were not aware that this research was also about the 'moral muteness' of managers. The interviews were analysed using all different levels of comparison, however cultural differences strongly overrode any other differences, which could be attributed to the two industries studied (food retail versus energy), the 'ecological cooperate identity', age, gender or level of education. These other differences were minor in this study, but further research would be useful, as this study for example could not really distinguish between male and female managers, the latter being under-represented due to access problems.

The Lifeworld and the Business System (Habermas 1984)

The accounts were analysed using Habermas' (1984) distinction between instrumental and communicative reason. He described in his 'Theory of Communicative Action' the decoupling of social systems and the 'lifeworld'. This is based on the idea that a culturally and historically created social system loses its connection with normal everyday life. The social system, such as the business system, is not perceived as a human creation any more. Its rules and actions are not questioned and are perceived as objective reality. Actors in this system claim that they have to follow certain inherent necessities. Their way of thinking and acting is seen as morally neutral, so strong is the disconnection from the lifeworld. Habermas calls the prevalent rationality in such a system 'instrumental reason' and distinguishes it from the 'communicative reason', which keeps the boundaries open between the lifeworld and the social system. "Unlike instrumental reason, communicative reason cannot be subsumed without resistance under a blind self-preservation. It refers neither to a subject that preserves itself in relating to objects via representation and action, nor to a self-maintaining system that demarcates itself from an environment, but to a symbolically structured lifeworld that is constituted in the interpretive accomplishments of its members and only reproduced through communication. This communicative reason does not simply encounter ready-made subjects and systems; rather, it takes part in structuring what is to be preserved" (Habermas 1984: 398). This

‘communicative reasoning’ was further used by Habermas (1987) to formulate his famous discourse ethics, where people agree on the best course of action by formulating and contradicting in their ‘communicative reasoning’. However in this present paper, the focus is more on whether managers use ‘communicative reasoning’, which means non-instrumental reasoning, or not.

In this context, environmental reasoning could become part of instrumental reasoning, so that environmental issues are subsumed under the prevalent paradigms in the business world such as short-term or long-term profit maximisation. In this case they are often treated as if they do not represent specific values, as in Crane’s description of amoralization described above. Often managers would follow another value such as profit maximization, which makes the business the moral object of concern and integrate, for example, energy savings into it, but without any awareness that they have taken a value-driven decision; for them it is *a value-neutral decision*.

On the other hand, individuals might use ‘communicative reasoning’ to structure the economic system differently in order to tackle environmental problems; here they refer to new experiences in the ‘lifeworld’ and values associated with them. Managers would then talk explicitly about values and how to integrate them into business.

Grounded theory inspired the analysis of the research material (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). They requested that the researcher should have no preconception about the topics under investigation and that the theories should follow the data. But the social constructionist research paradigm chosen for this study assumes that we cannot formulate theory solely from data; by asking certain questions during the research process we already influence the data that we will collect. Therefore this study has not adopted grounded theory. However, the present research followed the approach taken in grounded theory insofar as theories were drawn from the data during the research process and these theories were then further explored during the next interviews. For example, very early on German managers referred unprompted to role models as influential in developing their environmental awareness; in later interviews therefore all managers in both countries were asked whether they have a role model, which proved to be interesting as shown below. Additionally, some tools of grounded theory helped to analyse the vast amount of data generated through the interviews. At the beginning of the analysis, the

researcher employed ‘open coding’, which Strauss and Corbin (1990, p. 61) describe as “the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualising and categorizing data”. Each paragraph of the interviews was coded. These codes were either related to the theories and concepts identified through the literature review, such as ‘separates own values from best interest for company’, or emerged as new labels such as ‘role model’. The different labels were then transferred to coloured ‘post-its’ together with a significant quote. The different colours represented the broad categories identified as areas of interest while designing the survey guidelines. Within these broad areas the ‘post-its’, each representing only one element, were then grouped together under meaningful labels such as ‘theologian or philosopher as role model’.

As the researcher used ‘post-its’ there was scope for rearranging them on the poster over and over again. This allowed the researcher for example to sort one code such as ‘role model’ into all the categories under investigation. The researcher divided the ‘post-its’ on the poster according to differences in gender, age, sector, level of education, corporate identity or/ and nationality, the last one in most cases turning out to explain the differences better than any other category.

Findings

The following table will give an overview of the ‘codes’ that proved to explain interesting differences between German and British managers. These differences are then explained in more detail using various quotes as examples.

Code	British Managers	German Managers
‘You have to separate your own values from what is in the best interest for the company’	8/14	None of them made this or a similar statement
Argued from Business Case	All but one.	Two focus on ‘saving costs’
Argued from values e.g. environmental values	One manager	15/17
‘Avoid being emotional’	10/14	Not a topic for German managers
Referred to their beliefs and values	Only when talking about environmental improvements at home	All.
‘Considering the environment is part of being a good manager’	None made this statement	14/17
Role model from Business	5	2 (both without Abitur)

Community		
Philosopher or theologian as role model	0	6
No role model	9	0

Table 1: Differences between British and German managers

The British managers strongly distinguished between their ‘own values’ and what they claimed was in the best interest of the company. They argued that a manager should not let his own values affect the business. The way for them to avoid this was to establish a ‘Business Case’ as demonstrated in the following quote:

“If you are talking about values and value judgements, you are bound to be influenced by your own personal convictions.Well.....I think again, you’ve got to separate my opinions from what are the best interests of the organisation that you work for. And there you try to ensure they are as consistent as possible, sometimes there will be some divergence. And clearly, when you work in an organisation, sometimes you have got to put your own personal opinions to one side. And the way I try to, to get this across is that, whatever we do, we will always try and establish a business case for doing it.” (UK-FE 3)

In this study, in answering the more personal questions posed to them, British managers still argued along similar lines to the managers in Fineman’s 1998 study: They evaluated environmental activities and issues using business criteria. However, in contrast to the managers in Fineman’s study, the rationale mostly used by the British managers was ‘the business case’. Hence all but one manager expressed the same opinion that you have to establish a ‘business case’ in order to implement environmental improvements, demonstrating cost savings. Even managers who described themselves as passionate about environmental issues would argue that they have to make the business case:

“...everything you are doing in business has to add value to the company...so if you do not do it you wouldn’t survive...and the environment adds value in so many different ways...instant cost savings- if you change your taps you are saving water (...) the environment- this is very cheesy- the environment is the only thing in business that can save you money in business without having to increase your sales...so why not do it” (UK-FE 2)

Only one British manager explained that she would *translate* her own environmental values into the business language by making the business case. All others argued similarly to the following manager, who considered herself to be an environmentalist, but claimed that every environmental concern she has can be expressed as a business case.

“R: How would you balance the business case and environmental case?”

UK-E 1: It has to make business sense, full stop! If it would harm the business in any way, then you shouldn't do it. If you can put some money behind it, it helps! (....) I don't start with the environmental values and put them into a business case...I think I have a gut feeling as that it makes business sense as well. If I can't find the evidence, it doesn't convince me...so I always have the business case...”

In contrast most managers would just discuss the business implications and would only sometimes add as an afterthought that it saves the environment. Often they had to be prompted to discuss the environmental values and implications. This became strikingly clear when they argued that they would not implement environmental improvements even if this would reduce costs.

Some managers expressed that they have strong environmental values in their private life, but they keep this separate from their work. In business the economic rationality had to prevail!

Even if they had the power to influence decisions they would try to be ‘neutral’. One senior fruit buyer of a supermarket exclaimed that he would personally ask the farmers to spray less, but that he cannot express his own opinion even though he was in charge of writing the policies, which he wanted to keep ‘neutral’.

Even talking about environmental issues was regarded as ‘showing emotion’, something best avoided in what can be referred to as the British Business discourse. For the British managers it seemed important to appear rational and value-neutral in business encounters. Therefore they were stressing the point that their opinions were based on a ‘scientific’ analysis and often used the phrase ‘as a scientist’ to underline their credibility. Most managers perceived environmentalists, especially from environmental pressure groups, as outside the scientific discourse by giving biased arguments.

However the few managers who presented themselves as environmentalists highlighted that one can only make an informed decision by getting the facts from all societal groups.

The business system in its current form was not only described as unchangeable, but some quotes even suggested that managers perceived it as a given and not created by man. A preferred argument was to refer to the 'real world', which opposes any consideration other than price, as in the following quote:

"If we want to win contracts...maybe you have to have a certain standard like ISO 14001 but then the company cheaper or best able to do the job cheap...it has to be said that aye... that's the real world...good will doesn't count so much in the real world..."(UK-E 6)

It could be argued that British managers stayed within the prevalent logic of what Habermas (1984) called the 'instrumental reasoning' of the existing business system, rarely questioning its purpose or contents. Furthermore, one could say that the managers stayed so much within the prevalent logic of the business system that they did not even see it as a human creation any more. For them it seemed to be objective and for example 'maximizing shareholder value' is just what you do in business. There was no awareness that this instrumental reasoning was created in the first place and that the idea of 'maximizing shareholder value' for example is not even two hundred years old. There was also no indication that they realized that values had been implemented into the business system in the past, nor that they are still driving the business system. And that the question is therefore more whether a manager follows his own values or values decided by others as 'being good for business'. For the British managers, morality and values were outside the 'objective' business system, hence they exhibited this strong 'moral muteness' when talking within the business system.

In contrast to the British managers, the German managers never referred to making the business case. Furthermore, the German managers apparently used no other expression that would convey a similar meaning. The phrase, which is closest to the British understanding of 'business case', is that they do something 'aus Kostengründen' (because of cost factors). Therefore the German managers mentioned quite often that their environmental improvements save costs. However, the German

managers seemed to have reversed the order. While the British managers would add as an afterthought, if at all, that it helps the environment, the German managers would start their argument with the environment and add that it also saves costs. The managers would often explain environmental improvements in detail, highlighting their environmental values and what one should do; sometimes one can only assume that they are also saving costs. In the next quote for example it is not clear whether the reuse of material such as plates during a food tasting or the separation of material for the waste collection actually saves money; the manager only refers explicitly to costs when she talks about the saving of energy:

G-FE 5: "While we – actually urge the staff and colleagues....It depends on the packaging material, that one does not handle it lavishly. And one should not only use plastics, but also during food tasting, where one should use such things, which can be reused- in other words that we don't throw it in the bin straight away. Because the waste separation is also important... That is also an environmental issue. And the same applies to electricity, economizing electricity. That's a question of money."

In most cases the manager would construct an argument that focuses on the environmental value relevant to the specific situation. In the next quote, for example, the manager gives a moral reason for their regional approach. This approach might or might not save costs, but this is not discussed by the manager.

"...there's a strawberry farm next door. And from this farmer, where it is the best quality and the price is in line with our price, in season we get direct delivery several times per day - from the field. That's naturally better than if it's transported over long distances, isn't it?" (G-FC 4)

Most German managers would stress that there are times where you have to concentrate on your costs as the survival of the company is at risk. But once survival is secured, most managers would claim that they now have the freedom to integrate other values such as environmental protection. The following energy provider, for example, had to concentrate on survival after privatisation, yet the company has not only managed to survive but to be profitable. Now as the manager highlighted, they are able to set aside five million Euro of their profits for 'Pro-Klima' (Pro-Climate), an initiative

which promotes the usage of renewable energy and energy-saving appliances in the domestic and business sectors. For example 'Pro-Klima' informs interested citizens about energy saving refrigerators and contributes €50 towards the cost of a highly energy efficient (A rated) model if bought by the customer.

"Last year more concentration on competition, on prices etc..environmental protection has not been neglected, but we did not talk about itwe haven't gone to the dogs, on the contrary we are rather successful, funding 'Pro-Climate' with our gains, more than 5 million Euros per annum...price competition is now over, now it is more about quality and there we put the environmental protection in..." (G-E5)

The German managers were quite vocal about their environmental values and achievements. While the British manager would argue the business case, why they have invested in environmental measures, most German managers would quote environmental considerations as reasons for their business decisions. They would dwell considerably on these arguments and only add briefly, if at all, that these measures also help to save costs or improve the image of their company. One could even get the impression that German managers find it inappropriate, maybe even morally wrong to put their own interest or the interest of the company first. They might use for example the diminutive 'ein bisschen Eigennutz' (a little self-interest) as if self-interest was not really suitable.

The German discourse seems to mix financial considerations with environmental arguments. Utilizing Habermas' concept of 'instrumental reason', 'economic rationality' in the German context seems to be based on the principle that a company has to make money in order to survive. If a company fulfils this basic principle then it can afford to integrate other values into its business decisions. However, it would seem that the use of 'instrumental reasoning' and 'communicative reasoning' are constantly intertwined in the German business discourse, at least with regard to environmental issues. Sometimes the business considerations would for example override the environmental arguments, but the managers would still discuss the environmental implications. Often they would use moral arguments to support their point of view.

The manager in the following quote for example stated that the company is regularly checked with regard to environmental improvements (and cost-savings), but he stressed that for him it is not enforcement. Instead he sees it as a necessity to consider the environment, as the environment is so important for him:

“But I see that not as enforcement, but it is part of the overall process. And environment is for myself an important aspect, because think about the destruction of the rain-forest or the climate change. They are only two buzzwords, about which we should be worrying more and more, how this can go on. So that impairs the working world more and more.” (G-FC 5)

It is interesting that for British managers being disinterested in environmental issues is seen as the rational thing to do. Even Fineman (1996) followed the same line of argument when he described the managers in his studies as skilled at techno-rationalization (taking the emotional sting out of the debate), which included in his opinion the environmental issues. However, one could argue that it is very irrational to destroy the environment, on which we as human beings depend. This line of argument is the one German managers tended to follow.

In the earlier German studies, managers had also used the attributes ‘emotional’ and ‘rational’ to distance themselves from environmentalists. However, even in these earlier studies this differentiation had another connotation: the German managers claimed that their rationality was morally superior as they tried to analyze the problems in all their dimensions. The managers saw themselves as the only ones who assessed the environmental problems based on scientific knowledge and without being influenced by emotions, fear and prejudices. This approach allowed them to determine the environmental problem correctly and to solve it. So in these earlier studies, it was not the environmental topic per se that was seen as an emotional topic, but the way environmentalists were dealing with it was seen as too emotional.

In the present study German managers were not referring to these earlier arguments anymore; categories like ‘emotional’, ‘rational’ and ‘scientific’ did not feature in the German discourse about environmental issues. Instead, German managers either claimed to be environmentalists or described

themselves as environmentally conscious. They would argue morally that a manager has to have a sound knowledge of environmental issues in order to be a good manager.

Generally German managers referred to moral arguments throughout the whole discourse. As mentioned before, they seem to use 'instrumental reason' and 'communicative reason' simultaneously. One could argue that the business system in the German context is not separate from the lifeworld; managers employed frequently moral arguments from the 'communicative reason' to challenge the 'instrumental reason'. Furthermore, the focus on (environmental) values, the 'communicative reason' seemed to be their preferred way of communication.

The British managers on the other hand perceived the business system as separate from the lifeworld. They stayed within the logic of the business system, used only 'instrumental reason' and therefore seemed to be convinced that they were acting and talking in a neutral 'moral free' way. Hence they exhibited 'moral muteness', while the German managers did not even show a trace of 'moral muteness'. One could even go further by suggesting that displaying 'moral muteness' would be seen as inappropriate within the German business discourse, as good managers have to integrate values into their business decisions and talk about it.

Very pronounced were the cultural differences with regard to role models. British managers either named a person from the business community or they claimed that they had no role model. If they referred to a role model, most cited the CEO.

“The only person that comes into my mind which I find quite inspiring is our chief executive because he looks at the business side as well and so it is not just about what is the right thing to do, what is the right thing to do and what does this mean for business and how do we get strategic advantage...it is a message that best reaches people...he is also fostering relationships with RHSP, Nature trust, he was opening the doors for me.” (UK-E 2)

However, most British managers stated that they had no role model. Some of the managers would elaborate a bit more. A few said that some documentaries on the television had more of an impact on them than any person. Some also highlighted that people might have their own agenda; they would pretend to be concerned about something but in reality they were only fostering their own career.

Some seemed to try hard to find someone they could name as a role model and were pondering this question for quite a while. Others, however, said with emphasis that they want to be themselves and that they therefore would not take a person as a role model.

Most of the German managers on the other hand referred to someone outside the business world such as a philosopher, certain Christians, politicians, friends, and teachers. In response to the question they would cite one or more personalities and would then explain straightaway, without further prompting by the researcher, why they thought that this person was their role model and what they have learned from them. Often they would also express some emotional statement, how they were fascinated by their speech, approach or book. In some interviews the transcript of the answer to this question filled a few pages. However, even if they did not elaborate on it, they would name the person and then give the reason for their choice. It is interesting to note that the two German managers without 'Abitur' (the German equivalent to A-Levels) both chose someone from their company, similar to some of the British interviewees. These managers without 'Abitur' left school at 16. Maybe they were therefore in a similar situation to the British managers, who have to concentrate on one subject (area) at the age of 16 for their A-Levels and are not exposed to a wide area of subjects in school anymore. The German students on the other hand have to take for their 'Abitur', German, one foreign language and History, Politics, Religion or Philosophy along with Mathematics and Natural Sciences until the age of 19. This might broaden their understanding, so that later in life they draw on different tools, even when they are working in one specific area like in a business.

Conclusion

The concept of 'moral muteness', coined by Bird and Waters as early as 1989, has only recently been applied in different management studies (Drumwright and Murphy, 2004, Verhezen, 2010 and Trapp, 2011). However, the underlying idea that managers have problems in 'articulating' a moral problem, that is to identify the moral dimensions of normal business activities and decisions, has been suggested elsewhere without labelling it 'moral muteness'. For example in his analysis of various existing models of ethical decision-making, Jones (1991) highlights the importance of the first step,

that the manager identifies a given business situation as a moral one. “A person who fails to recognize a moral issue will fail to employ moral decision-making schemata and will make the decision according to other schemata, economic rationality, for example” (1991: 380). Environmental problems especially are not presented as ethical problems; they are analysed and tackled using a bureaucratic, resource oriented approach. As Crane and Matten (2007) point out, all stages, not only the first stage in the ethical decision-making process, are influenced by the issue’s moral framing; the most important aspect of moral framing being the language in which moral issues are presented. The problem they observe is “that many people in business are reluctant to ascribe moral terms to their work, even if acting for moral reasons, or if their actions have obvious moral consequences” (2007:153). Bird and Waters (1989:78) also point out that managers “shun moral talk in order to not expose their own ethical illiteracy. Most managers neither know nor feel comfortable with the language and logic of moral philosophy. At best they received instruction in juvenile versions of ethics as children and young adults in schools and religious associations. They have little or no experience using ethical concepts to analyse issues. They may more readily and less self-consciously use some ethical terms to identify and condemn obvious wrongdoings, but do not know how to use ethical terms and theories with intellectual rigor and sophistication to identify and resolve moral issues”.

The present study confirmed that British managers prefer not to talk about their own values or morals in general. Rather, they insist that in management the focus should be on what is in the best interests of the business. This is understood as the neutral, objective way of doing business; there is no appreciation that the system of business was created out of the 'lifeworld' (Habermas 1984) and that at this point a certain set of morals was implemented. Nor an appreciation that certain ways of doing business e.g. the focus on shareholder value are changed throughout history, again implementing moral arguments and transferring them into a business argument. In the UK moral arguments are just not seen or 'heard' or talked about as part of the business discourse. Hence this study confirms that British managers exhibit 'moral muteness' (and sometimes 'moral deafness!'). If they have strong moral values they will translate them into the 'business case', a language seen to be morally neutral.

This is a similar approach to the one taken by Glenn Ferness, the manager observed in Watson's (2003) study. But the point that this paper wants to make beyond Watson's article is that many British managers refer to 'corporate morality' in the sense 'that this is how we do business here', but without any appreciation that this is 'corporate *morality*', business decisions based on morals (values). This study proposes that there is no value-neutral way of doing business, rather it is a conflict between the established values, which are framed as objective, and new or different values such as environmental protection, which are framed as ethics. Or in Habermasian terms, it is a conflict between 'instrumental reasoning' and 'communicative reasoning'. Managers need to understand that their actions are based on values whether they make the 'traditional business case' or discuss their environmental values and how to integrate them into business. This does not suggest that managers have to follow the principles of 'Discourse Ethics' to exercise their communicative reasoning; these concepts are two distinctive concepts in Habermas' philosophy. Rather, using communicative reasoning means using all the arguments available in a *Human Discourse* and not being restricted by the language used in business, the language used in law or the language used in philosophy to name a view. It might make sense to follow Habermas (1987)' 'Discourse Ethics' or other approaches as outlined by Joas (2008) to achieve value generalization, however the first step is to use 'communicative reasoning' at all to open up the discussion.

Going beyond previous research, this study also posed the question of whether 'moral muteness' can be observed in other countries. As shown above, the German managers interviewed for this study tended to use moral arguments when discussing corporate greening, often giving them preference over financial arguments. Therefore the question asked at the beginning, whether the 'moral muteness of managers' (Bird and Waters, 1989), or in other words the proposition that "there is a tendency in corporations for greening to be accompanied by a process of *amoralization*" (Crane 2000: 673) is only observable in an Anglo-American context, or whether it is an international phenomenon, comes down clearly in favour of the former. Further cross-cultural studies could build on these differences in trying to understand the cultural impact on the usage of moral arguments in the business discourse, especially with regard to corporate greening.

Cultural differences strongly overrode any other differences, which could be attributed to the two industries studied, the corporate ecological identity or the age, gender or level of education of the managers. However, further research is necessary to understand how socio-cultural institutions, other than the corporation itself as investigated here, might influence the usage of moral arguments. Werner (2008) highlights in her article that SME Owner-Managers who consider themselves Christians (mostly Evangelical or Pentecostal) claim to be influenced by their Christian belief in their business actions and have no problem stating this. Furthermore, Werner also compares German and British managers suggesting that the ‘shared *religious* identity might be stronger than the *national* identity’ (2008:459). ‘Moral Muteness’ might therefore be influenced by a manager’s religious belief and national identity, so that managers in the Anglo-American context might express their values when they consider themselves Christians or are affiliated to a certain denomination such as ‘Pentecostal’. In this present study, only the German managers referred to their religious beliefs which were widespread, but this was not a focus of the investigation. This relationship between ‘Moral Muteness’, religious identity and national identity needs further exploration.

German managers present themselves differently from British managers when *talking* to someone about their business practices. Future research needs to follow, for example how decisions are made in Germany in comparison to the UK. Do German managers also argue from a moral point of view when conducting business, or do they just do this when presenting themselves to the ‘outside world’? This could give insights into how to talk to managers in different cultures when implementing ideas such as sustainability, where new values are introduced. In some countries it might be appropriate to open a moral discourse, as this study suggests for the dialogue with German managers; here managers could use ‘Discourse Ethics’ or other methods to communicate about values and agree for their business practices on “common denominators of their (...) different value systems” (Joas 2008;88). In the Anglo-American context this approach would not be successful; therefore here sustainable issues for example are introduced in a way that does not question the perceived neutral way of managing businesses (Hitchcock and Willard, 2009; Lingl et al, 2010). However it is also imaginable that managers could learn how to identify the underlying moral arguments in business and become morally

literate. In the Anglo-American context, managers would need to learn first that it is 'acceptable' to express values in business, before they could take part in a value discourse.

This study has been approved by the appropriate ethics committee and has therefore been performed in accordance with the ethical standards laid down in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki. All managers interviewed gave their informed consent prior to their inclusion in the study. Details that might disclose the identity of the subjects under study have been omitted.

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